

FROM LEVITTOWN TO L.A., HE LEAVES 'EM LAUGHING

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FULL TEXT

His mother stops short of calling him rude as a child, but in order to discourage his biting remarks, she and her husband held in their laughter until they reached the nearest closet.

"Sometimes he was a little too sarcastic," said Alma Kunes, of her son, Steven, the Hollywood writer.

Combining a visit to Alma and Chuck Kunes' Levittown home with research for a television movie, Kunes, 32, watched his 6-year-old son, Nathaniel, being ushered in from a swim with his grandmother. Several minutes later the boy was shepherded out the door by the elder Kunes. They were goin' fishing.

Since Kunes left the East Coast for Los Angeles six years ago, he estimated his son has flown around the country 39 times. The cross-country treks began in 1983, when Kunes was given a one-year contract with Norman Lear, the creator of such television shows as All in the Family, Maude and Sanford and Son. The big break was based on Lear's favorable impression of two rejected television scripts Kunes sent.

But encouragement for Kunes' comedic skills came early. Although his parents may not have wanted to encourage his sharp tongue, at least one of his schoolteachers did.

"If I promised not to disrupt the room, my 11th grade English teacher (Chris Beck) from Neshaminy said she would give me five minutes at the end of each class to be funny," Kunes said last week, adding that she later encouraged him to write rather than to just say funny things.

Then, equipped with a literature degree from New York University, he started writing and his byline slowly began appearing in major publications.

"In one month on the newsstand I had an article in Penthouse entitled 'How To Have a One-Night Stand' and in Cosmopolitan - 'How To Know if He's Really Serious after a One-Night Stand.' "

Although financially he did well as a free-lancer, he followed his wallet to where the real money was - Hollywood. He sent Lear two rejected scripts from Taxi and M*A*S*H. Lear was sufficiently impressed to fly Kunes out to Universal Studios to write television pilots based on Lear's ideas.

Many, such as Marblehead Manor and Trial and Error - a sort of hard-edged Mary Tyler Moore show - were either short-lived or never appeared on TV. Others, he said, were "real bombs."

a.k.a. Pablo, starting comic Paul Rodriguez, was one such show.

"I was forced to write it," Kunes said. "I think they drew straws.

"It's the one where he goes on the Merv Griffin Show and embarrasses his family and is invited back the next night promising his family he will apologize," he recalled. "He doesn't."

After Lear sold his company, which later became Columbia Television, Kunes wrote elsewhere.

"I did a Webster, Kate and Allie, Magnum, P.I., Our House, What's Happening Now, Cosby - It was the one where Vanessa gets a bad grade, then for 22 minutes and 38 seconds Cosby tells her she should study more and she says she will - and a Love Boat."

Kunes said the Love Boat episode was atypical and starred pop artist Andy Warhol.

"Andy Warhol had written a letter to (producer) Aaron Spelling saying that he thought the Love Boat epitomized crass commercialism and thought it was the most blatantly awful thing ever on television," Kunes said.

And it was for precisely that reason Kunes said Warhol wanted to appear on the show. The production company hired Kunes because he was not the typical Love Boat formula writer.

"Now I can say I collaborated with Andy Warhol on one of the worst things that's ever been done," he said.

Then in 1985 and 1986 he was on the staff of the CBS program Kate and Allie, starring Jane Curtin and Susan Saint James.

Most writers are wary of television stars' friendly overtures, Kunes said. The stars of a show will often patronize the writers, hoping for a script idea that will feature them, he said. It was well publicized that Saint James was unhappy about her character acting as a buffer for Curtin, who always got the punch lines, Kunes said.

"So consequently Susan Saint James was happy with me more than the other writer because I came up with an episode that featured her and it proved that she could do comedy," he said.

The program also illustrated the far-reaching effects of television. While on vacation on Tahiti, he met an Australian who asked Kunes what episodes he wrote for the recently canceled Kate and Allie. He said he began giving a synopsis when the Aussie interrupted him and finished the plot he wrote.

And although about 53 million people probably saw that particular episode, writing is a trade that one plies essentially by oneself, said Kunes. Last year's writers' strike brought home just how lonely being a writer is. And while he didn't exactly wax nostalgically for the strike, he said it was encouraging to meet some of the other writers for the first time.

"Here we all are standing in the picket line," he said. "I'm standing in front of Sidney Sheldon and in back of Harold Ramis (of Ghostbusters fame) - and you know their names - but here you actually . . . see their face . . . you know that they do what you do - they sit in their room and type and talk about their chiropractor and their back problems.

"It is a very high-profile industry and yet the writing aspect is done privately."

It was in 1980 that Kunes decided to write for television, and he credits Hal Linden, who was finishing up Barney Miller, with the inspiration. Linden told Kunes that if he showed imagination in his writing he would stand out in the television industry.

Kunes asked Linden why television was so unimaginative.

"Linden said mostly he felt that there weren't that many talented writers, and the ones that were, were always busy working on something. And it was the better shows," he said.

However, he has since amended Linden's theory on TV writing and attributes the problem to a lack of variety in the Hollywood community.

"We shop at the same shops, buy cars from the same dealership and live in the same tiny town," he said. "Our thoughts are often the same."

Kunes said he believed that originality will come if more production was done outside of Los Angeles. Kunes said he hoped to move to Northern California.

In the meantime he has broken into movies. One of his scripts is slated to begin production this fall in Detroit and star Meg Ryan and Charlie Sheen.

And although he has been making a living in Tinseltown for six years, his mother, a Bensalem High School track coach, is leery.

"I always said you should have a nine-to-five with benefits," she said. "It has a lot of security."

Credit: By Abbe Klebanoff, Special to The Inquirer

Illustration

PHOTO (1)

1. Steven Kunes has the last laugh as a successful screen writer. (Special to The Inquirer / CHERIE KEMPER-STARNER)

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